

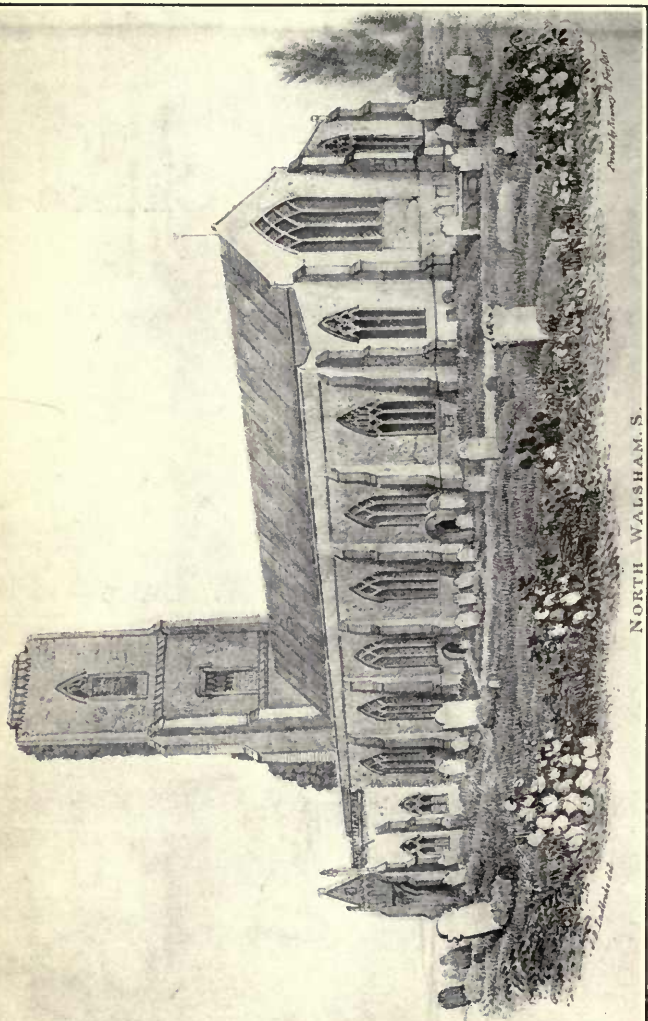
The Story of
St. Nicholas' Church
North Walsham

PRICE SIXPENCE

The Story of
St. Nicholas' Church
NORTH WALSHAM
NORFOLK

compiled by
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and
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ILLUSTRATED



From an old print. The Tower was originally 147 feet high. The first portion fell 16th May, 1724.

CHURCH OF ST. NICHOLAS, NORTH WALSHAM, NORFOLK.

THE Church of St. Nicholas stands in the centre of the old country town of North Walsham, with the market-place and narrow streets and courts surrounding it. In the church may be found many points of interest which tell the history of both church and town.

Early History.

The name Walsham is derived from the Anglo-Saxon "ham," indicating a small cluster of dwellings, and from "Wals" or "Wales," meaning an ancient inhabitant of Britain. Walsham was a place where the invading Saxons—round about the 5th Century—segregated the inhabitants they displaced. From these small beginnings North Walsham gradually developed, the North being added to distinguish it from other places of the same name.

As the Christian religion took root in England, the chief or lord of the soil considered it a duty, and a meritorious act, to build a church for the good of his tenants and people; and having done this, he next endowed it with a portion of land or glebe and appointed thereto a priest with a defined district, over which he was to exercise his holy function. This district was called a Parish.

Among the invaders of East Anglia, who have left their mark, were the Scandinavians, and a Norseman, named Sket, gave North Walsham with the church and the advowson to the Benedictine Abbey of St. Benet's. This abbey was probably founded by Cnut, and with it the history of North Walsham was closely bound up until the time of Henry the Eighth, who suppressed the monasteries.

The only source of information relating to parochial history at so early a date is the celebrated Domesday Book, which is a record for taxing purposes of the lands of England, begun in 1080 by order of William the Conqueror. This record mentions a church at Walsam, as North Walsham was then called, with thirty acres of land belonging to it.

Part of the tower of this Saxon church still remains, and stands on the north side of the ruined tower (see photograph on p. 7). It was built of flint with a ferruginous conglomerate, or local iron stone, used for the external quoins or angle stones. It is square in form and had windows on the north and south sides, and possibly a baptismal apse on the west side. It is not possible to say how far the nave of this church extended, or whether there was a chancel or not. In former church repairs there were indications that the north wall of the present church, as far as the third buttress, formed a part of this Saxon church.

At present all that remains of this tower is used for heating the church and for the organ-blowing apparatus.

The Saxon church was dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The present church is dedicated to St. Nicholas, but the date of the alteration in dedication has not so far been discovered.

The Weaving Industry.

England was early the great sheep farming country of the west, the wool being exported for manufacture. Flemish weavers are said to have come to England at the beginning of the twelfth century, settling at Worstead, from which place the name of the material "worsted" originated. Worstead is the adjoining parish to North Walsham. Weaving however made slow progress in this country until Edward the Third, who came to the throne in 1327, introduced large numbers of Flemish weavers. There was however prior to 1325 a well established market of worsted materials in North Walsham.

It seems probable therefore that the Saxon church had, towards the close of the thirteenth century, become too small to meet the needs of a rapidly growing and increasingly prosperous community, one for which church attendance was compulsory. There are records which point to the probability that church reconstruction was being considered as early as 1275.

The Present Church.

The building of the present church began probably about the year 1330. In 1338 the Abbot of St. Benet's was granted leave to take over the rectorial tithes and this was probably not without influence on the erection of the new church. No doubt the building was spread over many years.

When a visitor enters the church he cannot fail to be surprised by its remarkable dimensions and two points are particularly noticeable :—

1. There is no chancel arch, nor are there cross walls to break the view.

2. The wonderful proportions of the fine piers and arches of the arcades. The loftiness of the piers and the expanse of the arches and the size of the windows of the aisles are designed to compensate for the want of light from the clerestory range.

During the general restoration of the church between 1875 and 1881 the old roof of the decorated period was removed, and the present one erected. The old roof had been in position a little more than 500 years.

The Porch.

Over the arch leading into the porch there appear the Royal Arms of England on the right as one enters the church, and those of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, on the left. In 1340 Edward III. assumed the Arms of France ancient, which appear on the Church. In 1405 the Arms of France modern took their place in the Royal Arms. John of Gaunt was created Duke of Lancaster in 1362.

From these facts it is possible to arrive at the approximate date of the porch, which is of rather a later date than the church. Inside the porch there are the Arms of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, on the west side, and those of St. Benet's Abbey, who were the patrons of the living in pre-Reformation days, on the east side. In the porch and on the right of the church door may be seen the remains of the stoup, the receptacle for holy water. There still remains the tunnel way for the great wooden bar that fastened the church door, and on the church wall inside, west of the door, may be seen the place for the insertion of the hand to move the bar. A similar place may be seen by the north door, but the tunnel on this side of the church has been blocked.

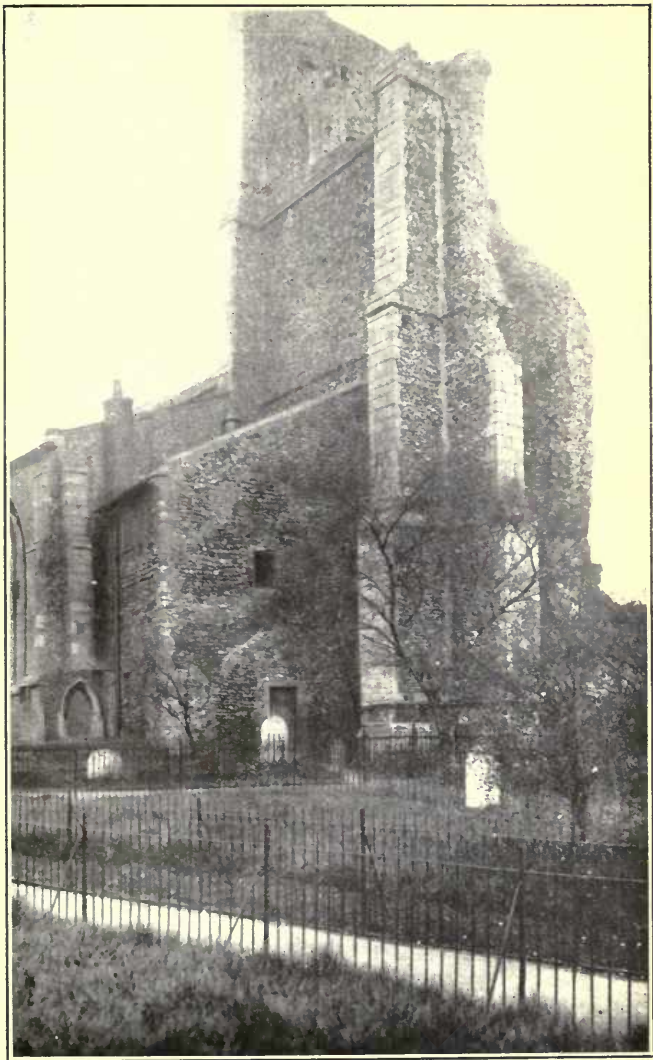
The Black Death.

The notorious "Black Death" occurred in 1348 and there were recurrences in 1361 and again in 1369. These very fatal epidemics interrupted the work of building in many places and there are signs that this great scourge left its mark on this church. The fact that on the outside of the church there are no internal quoins to the buttresses above the level of the springing of the window-heads of the aisles, and the extreme simplicity of the tracery of the aisle windows generally, as compared with the delicate tracery in the east windows of the aisles, may possibly be attributed to the lack of skilled masons as the result of the "Black Death."

The Peasants' Revolt.

But there were other troubles in those years besides pestilence. In 1381 there was a great battle on North Walsham Heath, about a mile south of the town between the forces of the Crown and a great host of Norfolk labourers who had revolted in common with others in various parts of the country. The causes were the discontent following the statute regulating labour in view of the scarcity of labour following the ravages of the "Black Death," and the imposition of the Poll Tax. The rebels numbering some thousands and including many local people, under John Litester, a dyer, were defeated by a trained force under Bishop Le Spencer of Norwich, and fled in confusion back to the town, many seeking refuge in the church which, perhaps, they had helped to build. The wayside cross seen on page 19 is said to mark the spot where the battle was fought. There are the remains of two other crosses on the supposed battle site, which was then all heath. Bishop Le Spencer followed the rebels, and slew all who were captured, showing no respect for the sanctuary to which they had retreated.

Considerable damage was done to the church by onslaught and fire, but it is improbable that this damage was beyond that met by restoration. There are no signs that the greater part of the church was rebuilt as tradition says.



*Ruined West Tower and Church from the North West
showing part of the Saxon Tower still standing.*

The Ruined Tower.

One further item of historical interest must be recorded before we consider the church in detail. Many a visitor to North Walsham is astonished on approaching the town to see the ruined tower, and the question is often asked why the tower has not been restored instead of being left as a picturesque ruin.

The Tower was probably built soon after the middle of the fourteenth century. It was originally 147 feet high and had a peal of six bells and a clock.

The Vicar, at the first fall of the tower made the following note :

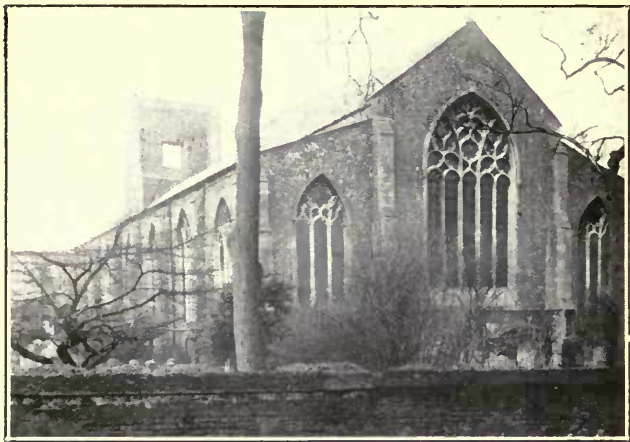
"Memorandum May the 16, 1724, on the Sat: between nine and ten of the clock in the forenoon fell down the south and west sides of the steeple and no person, man woman nor child (that we hear of yet) getting any mischief thereby. Thanks be to God for his goodness therein."

Between 1749 and 1761 a tower rebuilding fund was started, but there is no record of any rebuilding.

Probably in 1835 there were further small falls. On Tuesday, February 16th, 1836 and the next day, there were unusually heavy gales and "about six o'clock on Wednesday morning the north segment of the old steeple at North Walsham was blown down with a tremendous crash, damaging the roof of the library, filling up the chasm below, and bringing the bells into one mass of ruins. The inhabitants of the houses near experienced the sensation of an earthquake. The remaining east part of the tower only exists, which overhangs with a threatening aspect."*

Soon after some 40 or 50 feet of the dangerous portion were removed. No serious endeavour has been made through all these years to rebuild it. Its ruined aspect gives a totally wrong impression that the people of North Walsham take little interest in their Church. Nothing could be further from the truth, as the large congregations which assemble Sunday by Sunday testify, but rebuilding would be a vast undertaking and would require some thousands of pounds, and, moreover, during the last seventy years many thousands have been raised and spent on restoring and furnishing the church.

* From the *Norfolk Chronicle*



*The Exterior of the Church
from the South East.*



*Interior View
of Church.*

Points of Special Interest inside the Church.

The Screen.

Originally the screen must have stretched right across both nave and aisles with its loft, which could be approached from stairs still visible in the north and south walls ; the return screens running eastward would form chapels both to the north and south aisles. Parts of the side screens for the aisles, now standing at the west end of the nave, may at some time be restored to their original positions. All the beautiful upper part of the screen, once so glorious, has been cut away, leaving only the nave panels. These are of particular interest.

On the north side the panels, starting from behind the pulpit, denote : 1, obliterated ; 2, St. Catherine of Alexandria (A.D. 290), with wheel set with spikes ; 3, The Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary ; 4, the Angel Gabriel ; 5, St. Jude, Apostle, with boat in his hand ; 6, St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist, holding a money-bag and a book ; 7, St. Philip, Apostle, with a basket of loaves ; 8, St. Thomas, Apostle, with a spear or lance ; 9, St. Simon, Apostle, with staff and a fish in his hand ; 10, St. Peter, Apostle, with mitres in the corners above the panel.

On the south side : 1, St. Paul, Apostle, holding a book ; 2, St. Andrew, Apostle, with cross saltire X ; 3, St. John, Apostle and Evangelist, with sword and a palm branch ; 4, St. James the Greater, Apostle, holding a shell ; 5, St. Bartholomew, Apostle, with knife in sheath ; 6, St. James the Less, Apostle, with a fuller's club in his hand ; 7, St. Barbara, Virgin and Martyr (A.D. 306), carrying tower ; 8, St. Mary Magdalene, with a box of ointment in her hand ; 9, St. Margaret, Virgin and Martyr (4th century), piercing a dragon ; 10, obliterated. Some of the panels have been considerably damaged, and these names are only given to help the visitor find out what the representation depicts. The screen belongs to the Ranworth group. The figures can be known by comparison with other screens.

The Windows.

The visitor who is interested in archaeological problems will notice the fact, which may be observed from the photograph of the church from the south-east on p. 9, that the tracery



*The South Chapel, showing
old Communion Table.*



*War Memorial Chapel
in Parish Church.*

of the east windows of the two aisles belongs apparently to the late decorated period in which the church was built. There are indications in the drawing of the ruined tower, reproduced on page 2, that the tower upper windows had similar tracery. The tracery of the window at the east end of the south wall is of a perpendicular design, and the remaining windows of the aisles are of a yet later date. How far the historical facts described above give the explanation for these peculiarities it is not possible to say, but they indicate some possible causes for these variations.

The east window of the chancel was blown into the church during a gale in 1809. The tracery of that window was again of the simple design apparent in most of the aisle windows. In this window were depicted the arms of the See of Norwich impaling those of Edmund Freke, Bishop of Norwich between 1575 and 1584. The present tracery was given by William Forster in 1874, and the stained glass is a memorial to those from the parish who fell during the Great War. It was designed by Mr. Horace Wilkinson and adds considerably to the appearance of the east end, harmonising in a wonderful way with the old work in other parts of the church.

The South Chapel (see photograph on p. 11).

The communion table here is most interesting and must be one of the earliest wooden tables in existence. It dates back to 1549 and may be earlier. The inscription on the front of the table runs as follows:—

AND BLOVD

THE BODY OF OVR LORD JESVS CHRIST
WHICHE WAS GEVEN FOR THE PRESERVE THY
BODY AND SOVLE VNTO EVERLASTING LYFE.
AMEN.

In the first Prayer Book of Edward VI, 1549, the first Prayer Book after the Reformation, these words were used. In the second Prayer Book of Edward VI, 1552, the words used were: "Take and eat this in remembrance of Me," and in 1559, under the revision in Queen Elizabeth's reign, both sentences were included as we have them in the present Prayer Book. The words of this inscription seem therefore to point to 1549 as the date of the table, and the strange insertion above the line of the words "and Blovd" gives the impression that the



The Paston Monument.

carver added these words as an afterthought when he was reminded that with the Reformation the chalice was restored to the laity and the Holy Communion administered in both kinds.

The table has been repainted in recent years in the colours of which traces still remained from the time when it was first made.

Miserere Seats.

Two of the original miserere seats with their quaint carvings underneath the seats can be seen in the south chapel, and also a very old chair.

The Arch Behind the Sedilia.

On the north side of the south chapel a widely splayed arch may be seen behind the sedilia in the sanctuary. It is possible and there are indications that there was a similar arch on the south side of the north chapel. The purpose for which this arch was made is not known, but it may have been used for the purposes of a Confessional, or it may have been a place from which the unconfirmed or excommunicated persons could watch the sacred service, in which they were not able to join as communicants, or it may have been built to give additional light to the sanctuary.

Piscinae.

There are two piscinae, one by the side of the sedilia and one in the north chapel. These were used for rinsing the sacred vessels after Communion.

The Paston Monument (see photograph on p. 13).

On the north side of the sanctuary is seen the Paston Monument of alabaster, black marble and rance. It bears the effigy of Sir William Paston in full length in armour. The monument was erected in 1608 by John Key, a Freemason of London, by order of Sir William at a cost of £200 two years before his death. The monument is ornamented with a large shield giving the Paston coat of arms and eighteen smaller shields depicting their marriage connections. Sir William Paston founded and endowed the school in this town which bears his name. It was at this school that Admiral Lord Nelson and Archbishop Tenison of Canterbury (1695) were educated.

The North, or Warriors', Chapel (see photograph on p. 11).

The names of those who fell in the Great War are recorded on an oak panel in this chapel, and there is also an album containing photographs of all these men with the exception of five, whose photographs could not be obtained. The flags of the two local Red Cross hospitals are deposited here.

The old communion table with cabriolet legs may also be noticed. Carved in the centre is a chalice with grapes beneath. On the flat part above the legs are ears of corn.

South-West Corner of the Church.

Board with the Royal Arms.

After the Reformation it was a common custom to have the Royal Arms exhibited on the wall of the church, and in the reign of Charles II. these "royal arms" were ordered to be set up in all churches.

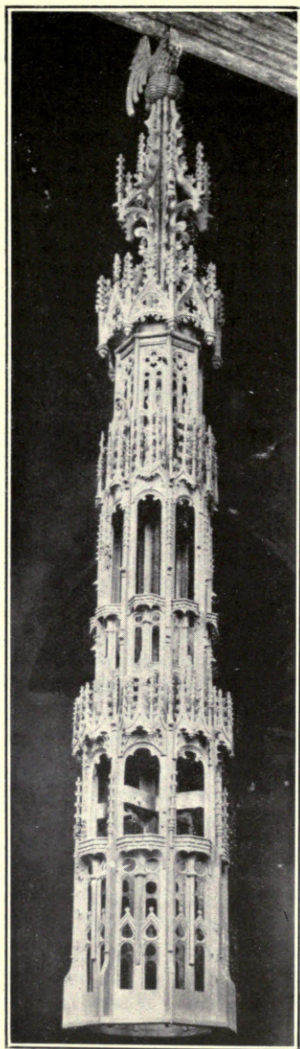
An interesting example of one of these boards can be seen hanging in the south-west corner of the church in such a manner that both sides of the board can now be observed. This panel was probably first used for the Arms of Charles I. In Cromwell's time the Arms of the Commonwealth were painted on it over the Arms of Charles I., but later were painted on the reverse side, and the board turned over. On the accession of Charles II. the board was again reversed, and his Arms were painted over those of the Commonwealth, and the date (1660) of the Restoration was added above the original panel.

Gargoyles.

Close by will be noticed two large gargoyles from the fallen tower.

The Iron Chest.

The large iron chest, or hutch, with its seven locks is an interesting relic of the days before banks and safes existed. Chests with three locks, the incumbent and each churchwarden holding a separate key, are fairly common. But this old chest would require seven people to be present, each with the key



The Font cover.

of the lock for which he was responsible, and it may be regarded as certain that nothing could be taken out of the chest without a sufficient number of witnesses that nothing was abstracted without proper sanction. In it were placed, no doubt, the church valuables and the property of the gilds.

The Baptistry.

Over the font is suspended a Gothic wooden cover of tabernacle work, rising in a succession of arches, balustrades and pinnacles and terminated by a pelican, feeding its young with the blood from its breast. The whole is suspended from a beam showing signs of early decoration in colour. This cover is of perpendicular design and was highly ornamented, probably dating from the fifteenth century. It was constructed in telescopic fashion, so that the lowest stage could be raised for baptisms by means of pulleys, still visible inside the structure. The lowest stage of the cover is missing, having become dilapidated no doubt in process of time.

Brasses.

In the church eight brasses will be found—in the north aisle, Dame Margarete Hetercete, 1397, and Sir Edmund Ward, Vicar, (1519); in the south chapel, William Rous, 1404, and Sir Robert Wythe, Chaplain (1515); in the nave, Robert Raunt, Chief Constable of the Hundred of Tunstead, 1625 (this brass is one of the earliest to have the Arms of the Grocers' Company); in the south aisle John Page, 1627, and on the wall under the arch in the south chapel, William and Joan Bettynys, 1460, and Robert Bradfield, 15th century. The first of these two was probably in Suffield Church originally, and the other in Bradfield Church. This may be the reason for their position not on the ground. The Warde and Wythe brasses are both examples of the chalice and wafer type.

The Great Fire.

At six o'clock on the morning of the 25th of June in the year 1600 began the great fire which in two hours practically destroyed the town, then largely built of wood. The Church narrowly escaped destruction as it was fired in no less than six places at once.

The Market Cross.

The market cross is said to have been built by Bishop Thirlby between 1550 and 1554, but as money was left by will for this purpose in 1545 and again in 1555 it does not seem likely that it was built at all in the Bishop's tenure of the See of Norwich. It was evidently built by 1558 as money then left for the cross was not for building but for leading. The cross was practically destroyed in the great fire in 1600, but is said to have been rebuilt by Bishop Redman by, at any rate, 1602.

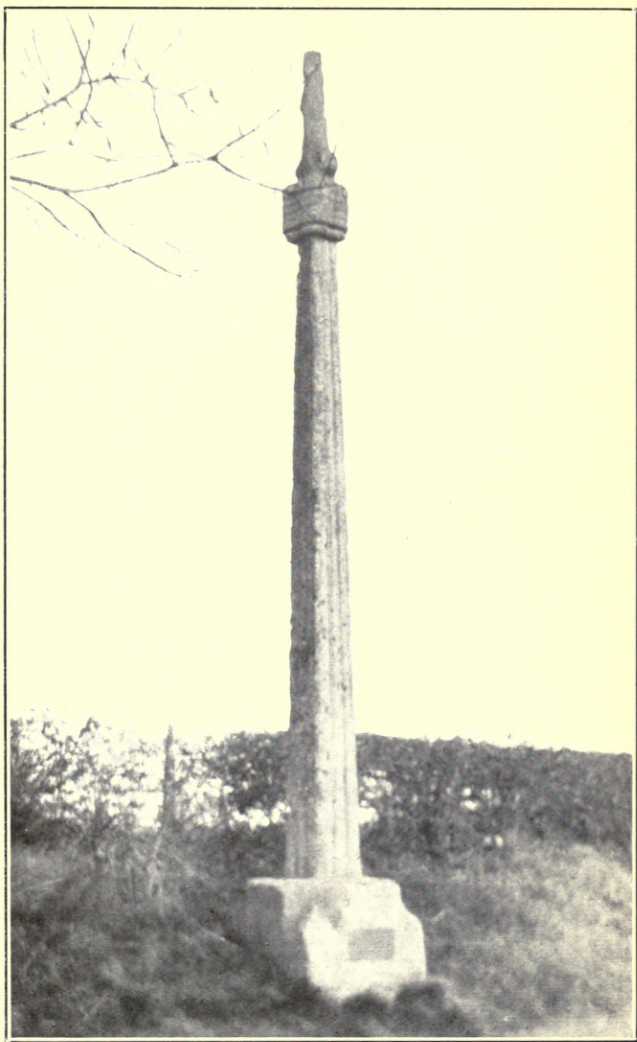
Conclusion.

It is not mere chance that there is this beautiful church standing in the very middle of the town. With the tower rebuilt and the Church thereby completed, it would be a symbol that religion and the worship of God is the centre of our life. The House of God is the most beautiful, the largest and loftiest building in the parish, and so the love of God should be the most beautiful thing in our hearts, to do His Will the largest piece of work in our lives, and His Worship and Praise the loftiest idea in our minds.

The profit from the sale of these guides will go to the Tower Restoration Fund, and visitors are asked to give donations to this fund, placing them in the box in the church.

Much information for compiling this guide has been obtained from two earlier guides, *Notes on North Walsham Parish Church*, by John Gaymer, and *North Walsham Church*, by George Hare. We are grateful to Messrs. J. F. Gaymer and S. Hare for permission to make use of these books.,

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*Wayside Cross, marking
site of battle in 1381.*

